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The Mid-Term Elections and U.S. Foreign Policy***

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A Change of Course in Washington? The Mid-Term Elections and U.S. Foreign Policy

This note addresses the following questions:

- The new Congress: A return to bipartisanship?
- What can the Congress do in foreign policy?
- Do the Democrats have a strategy for Iraq?
- What changes will the new leadership at the Pentagon bring?

As largely expected, the mid-term elections to the U.S. Congress on 7 November have brought about an end to one-party rule in Washington. For the first time since 1994 the House of Representatives has been taken by the Democrats and a slim Democrat majority has emerged in the Senate. The nation's dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, alongside the corruption scandals surrounding the GOP, proved to be the most important factors swinging the pendulum of American politics in favour of the Democrats. The day after the elections President Bush seemed to acknowledge that a 'fresh perspective' on the war was indeed needed. His decision to replace Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld with a reputedly more conciliatory figure, Robert Gates, demonstrates this.

With the new Democrat-dominated Congress, changes in the Administration and in anticipation of the Baker-Hamilton Commission's report, it seems that America's foreign policy, and especially its policy on Iraq, is heading towards a 'change of course'. However, a number of questions remain. For example, will the new Congress be in a position to effectively influence U.S. foreign policy? What will be the relationship between the Democratic legislature and Republican President? Do the Democrats have a clear idea of what to do about Iraq, Iran and other foreign policy issues? It is also not clear what policy changes may be brought about by the new appointment at the Defence Department or what Robert Gates's relationship with other governmental agencies will be, especially with the State Department. In what follows some tentative thoughts are offered on these matters.

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- **The New Congress: A return to bipartisanship?**

The message of most Democrats in these elections was: ‘if you want to stay the course, vote Republican; if you want a change, vote Democrat’. Many Democrats ran their campaigns on an explicitly anti-war and anti-Bush platform. However, with the Democratic Party poised to assume responsibility for the first branch of the government (as the Congress is referred to in the U.S. constitution) it is becoming apparent that the Democrats are positioning themselves at the Centre and are calling for bipartisanship. In her first address after the elections Nancy Pelosi (D-California), set to be the new Speaker of the House, has pledged bipartisanship and to work closely with President Bush on the legislative agenda. She has also made it clear that there will be no impeachment procedure instigated against Bush as demanded by some left-wing members of the party.²

Similar messages of bipartisanship have been repeated by the current minority leader in the Senate, Harry Reid, and other prominent Democrat leaders such as Senator Joseph Biden – the likely new chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. ‘Republicans don’t want to run for presidency in 2008 with Iraq around their necks, Democrats don’t want to assume the presidency in 2009 saddled with a losing war’, argued Biden in his call for a bipartisan strategy on Iraq.³ These Democratic calls for a new course and unity on national security have not gone unanswered by President Bush, who announced his decision to replace Rumsfeld with Gates only hours after Nancy Pelosi called for a new leadership at the Pentagon. Ahead of his meetings (on 9 November) with the new Democratic leadership of the Congress, Bush has pledged to ‘be open to any idea or suggestion’ that will help the U.S. to achieve its goals in Iraq.⁴

There are four main reasons for this emerging unity.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the sense of America’s growing international isolation, and consequently its weakness, is increasingly shared by both parties.

Secondly, neither party (and especially not the Democrats) can afford to look weak on national security. It is one thing to vote for setting a deadline for the withdrawal from Iraq – as some Democrats did last year – while in opposition, but quite another matter when such a vote could actually be successful.

Thirdly, one of the most unexpected things about the elections was the fact that the House Democrats picked up seats in some middle-of-the-road districts with so called ‘Blue Dog Democrats’ – social and fiscal conservatives – who will pitch the centre of gravity in the party to the right.

Finally, although the Democrats scored a remarkable victory, their advantage is too small to pursue anything other than a centrist agenda. In the House the Democrats lead by 28 votes but in the Senate it is just 2 votes – two of which are Independents (amongst them the pro-war Lieberman) who chose to caucus with Democrats.

However, whilst the leadership of the Democratic Party may intend to pursue a bipartisan agenda, it may not succeed. It is not clear, for example, how serious President Bush is about

² ‘The New House majority offers bipartisanship – and an ambitious agenda’, *Washington Post*, 9.10.2006.

³ ‘Bipartisan Redeployment’, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/publications/11785/

⁴ ‘Bush ‘open to any idea’ on Iraq’, CNN.com, 9.11.2006

reaching out to the Democrats. When he came to office in 2000, on the back of much contested elections, Bush portrayed himself as a unifier, but has subsequently become one of the most polarising President in modern American history. In addition, even if Bush does actually mend fences with the Democrats, his party may remain sceptical. Since the GOP losses affected mostly moderate Republicans, the new leadership of the party has shifted to the right, making it harder to reach compromises even when the White House is prepared to work with the Democrats.

- **What can Congress do in foreign policy?**

The Democratic victory creates more problems for the President on the domestic front than in the foreign affairs arena where the executive enjoys much greater flexibility. The Congress will have a direct impact on some domestic issues that have potential foreign policy implications, such as immigration reform (where Democrats are closer to Bush than to the GOP) and international trade. However, their potential influence on national security issues is much more limited. Here the legislature's most important role is its budgetary authority ('power-of-the purse') and its power to hold oversight investigations of the executive. The Senate may also confirm or reject some Presidential nominations.

It is certain that this Congress will use its oversight authority much more extensively than was the case with the former one. This role has substantially diminished in recent years, with the GOP-dominated legislature rubber-stamping the Administration's decisions and failing to investigate controversial policies – such as the treatment of detainees, investigations techniques and wiretapping. The new leadership has already indicated that it will use this power much more vigorously, with Nancy Pelosi declaring that Bush's anti-terrorism and war policies will be subjected to much closer scrutiny in the last two years of this presidency. Ike Skelton (D-Mo), expected to be new chair of the House Armed Services Committee, said that his first decision will be the reestablishment of the subcommittee on oversight and investigations, which was abandoned by the Republicans.⁵ In the past, investigative committees gave Congress a critical voice in foreign policy issues.

Examples include the Church committee investigating failures and illegal surveillance in the 1970s and the committees that examined the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s. In fact, it seems that the prospect of thorough congressional investigations into the work of Secretary Rumsfeld was one of the reasons triggering the change at the helm of the Defence Department. This Senate is also likely to look more thoroughly into the Presidential nominations: for example, it is almost certain that the current U.S. Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, will not be confirmed.⁶

The Congress's power-of-the-purse could potentially have a major impact on the conduct of the war in Iraq, forcing a decision on an early withdrawal. However, it is unlikely that the Democrats will overtly use this power to cut the level of military spending. Such a move would be seen as unpatriotic and endangering the well-being of the troops involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is the last thing of which the Democrats want to be accused. The likely nomination of pro-war Joseph Lieberman (who ran as an Independent after losing the Connecticut Democratic primary) to the chair of the Senate's Homeland Security Committee

⁵ 'The new House majority offers bipartisanship – and an ambitious agenda', *Washington Post*, 9.10.2006

⁶ 'John Bolton Likely to Depart U.N.', *NewsMax*, 9.11.2006

would suggest that the Democrats are keen to strengthen their profile on national security and *vis-à-vis* the armed forces.⁷

- **Do the Democrats have a strategy on Iraq?**

One of the main reasons why the Democrats are unlikely to drive a major policy shift on Iraq is their internal division on the matter. There are four main views within the Democratic Party on the U.S. strategy in Iraq.

1. Immediate Redeployment of Forces. This Plan was originally proposed by Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa) but it has since been supported by a number of prominent Democrats – including the Senate new majority leader Harry Reid. The plan calls for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq and establishing a quick reaction force in Kuwait. The plan also calls for a strengthened U.S. diplomatic engagement with other states in the Middle East. However, essentially, the plan boils down to shifting the responsibility for their own security to the Iraqis and major scaling down of American involvement in the region.
2. Timetable for the withdrawal. This is the essence of the bill sponsored by Senators John Kerry and Russ Feingold, which was defeated in the last Senate with the Democratic vote split on the issue (the motion was supported by 12 Democrats and 1 Independent). The plan called for a withdrawal by 1 July 2007 and an Iraq summit – a Dayton-like conference that would include Iraq's neighbours and members of the UN Security Council. Kerry has also called for the redeployment of some troops (at least 5,000) from Iraq to Afghanistan to fight the counter-insurgency there.
3. Decentralise Iraq. This plan has been proposed by the new chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee (and a likely presidential candidate) John Biden, and the President Emeritus of the Council for Foreign Relations, Leslie Gelb. The plan consists of three main points: firstly to amend the Iraqi constitution in a way that would strengthen its federal provisions – including a proposal to guarantee Sunnis 20% of oil revenues to be administered by the central government. Secondly, to plan and prepare the redeployment of most of the U.S. forces over the next 18 months but without fixing a precise timetable binding the President. Thirdly, to engage in vigorous regional diplomacy including all of Iraq's neighbours.⁸
4. Support the President. This is the line pursued by Joseph Lieberman (and, though to a much lesser extent, by Hillary Clinton) but as Lieberman's defeat in the Democratic primary demonstrated, it has little support in the party. On the other hand, the fact that Lieberman eventually prevailed and was elected to the Senate as an Independent has certainly strengthened his importance for the Democratic caucus in the Senate.

One issue on which Democrats agreed was to call for the resignation of Rumsfeld. This call was equally supported by John Murtha, Joseph Biden and Hillary Clinton. Once this call has been fulfilled it is not clear what other Iraq-related issues the party may rally behind. As the positive noises emanating from some key party figures indicate, there is a chance that the Democrats may unite in supporting the proposals of the Baker-Hamilton commission.

⁷ 'Sen. Reid Backs Lieberman for Homeland Security Chairmanship', NewMax, 10.11.2006

⁸ Joseph Biden & Leslie Gelb, 'Bipartisan Redeployment', *Wall Street Journal*, 24.10/2006

- **What changes will the new leadership at the Pentagon bring?**

The President's decision to replace Rumsfeld with the ex-CIA boss Robert Gates has been well received by many Democrats. Gates has a record of working with both parties, he is viewed as a non-ideological realist and as a far more consensus-minded person than Rumsfeld. Significantly, Gates's appointment was approved of by the former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was known in recent years for his fierce criticism of the war in Iraq and other aspects of Bush's foreign policy.

On the other hand, critics of the appointment point out Gates's role in the Iran-Contra affair when his nomination for CIA director was withdrawn. Some Democrats also question Gates's integrity and professionalism as the former Director of the CIA. For example Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) argued that Gates was involved in pressurising the agency's employees to develop analysis that would justify the foreign policy choices of Bush's Administration. However, although Gates is likely to go through a tough hearing at the Senate's Armed Forces committee, it is expected that the Democrats will confirm this nomination.⁹

It is of course too early to predict what policy alterations this appointment will entail but the following three factors may serve as indications.

Firstly, Gates is a member of the bipartisan Baker-Hamilton Commission. It is therefore likely that he will support or at least not object to the Commission's recommendations on the future of Iraq and the status of the U.S. forces there.

Secondly, at the Council of Foreign Relations Gates co-chaired (together with Brzezinski) an independent task force on the future of U.S. relations with Iran. In its conclusions, the task force's report advocates America's reengagement with Iran and warns against isolating Tehran.¹⁰

Thirdly, Gates was a member of America's 41st Administration (that of the current President father) and a renowned sovietologist. As such he is considered as one of Former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft's people – a realist and moderate.

As regards relations between the Pentagon and the State Department, the emerging picture is rather mixed. On one hand, some tensions between the two Departments and their bosses are expected. Condoleezza Rice is strongly associated with the current President, while Gates was a prominent member of the team that served Bush's father's Administration. Of all members of the current Administration, Condoleezza Rice has had the most privileged access to the President, but with the expectations placed on Gates she may be losing the battle for the President's attention. On the other hand, Rice and Gates have similar intellectual backgrounds (former sovietologists and academics) and it is an open secret that Rice's relationship with Rumsfeld was acrimonious. It is therefore possible that the inter-agency atmosphere in Washington will improve now.

⁹ 'Robert Gates lauded as breaker of barriers', *Washington Post*, 9.10.2006

¹⁰ Iran: Time for a New Approach, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, CFR 2004.

Center for International Relations

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